



Susan Bysiewicz
SECRETARY OF THE STATE
CONNECTICUT

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For more information:
Av Harris (860) 509-6255
Cell: (860) 463-5939

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BYSIEWICZ, CONGRESSMAN MURPHY ANNOUNCE FEDERAL LEGISLATION REPEALING V.A. BAN ON VOTER REGISTRATION

HOUSE BILL SPONSORED BY MURPHY WOULD ALLOW NON-PARTISAN VOTER
REGISTRATION DRIVES AT VETERANS' HOSPITALS NATIONWIDE

CHESHIRE: Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz today joined Congressman Christopher Murphy (CT-5) at the town green in Cheshire to announce federal legislation, sponsored by Murphy, that would repeal the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs ban on voter registration drives for patients at V.A. hospitals, nursing homes and homeless shelters.

"This powerful yet simple legislation comes not a moment too soon," said Bysiewicz, "we have less than 100 days until the most important election in a generation. Chris Murphy is showing that he and other members of Congress are standing up for our military veterans, who sacrificed so much to preserve our right to vote. Our wounded warriors deserve access to information about voting and they should be allowed to register to vote in the V.A. facilities. The VA's policy is a slap in the face to our most patriotic Americans, and a violation of their civil and constitutional rights."

Representative Murphy's bill, entitled the "Veteran Voting Support Act," mirrors a similar bill in the senate sponsored by U.S. Senators Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and John Kerry (D-Mass.) that would require the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to provide voter registration services to veterans in the department's care and allow non partisan groups and election officials to conduct voter registration drives at V.A. hospitals, nursing homes, and homeless shelters nationwide.

“Veterans have done so much for our country, it’s only right that we do all we can to assist them in exercising their constitutional right to vote. It’s unfortunate that we need a federal law, but if that’s what it takes to guarantee the right to vote, then Congress is prepared to act,” said Murphy.

On May 5th, The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs issued a directive banning voter registration drives at VA facilities nationwide, claiming they were partisan and would be disruptive to patient care. On June 30th, Secretary Bysiewicz and Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal attempted to go to the VA hospital in West Haven, CT but were not allowed inside the facility. Despite the ban, Bysiewicz was able to register 12 veterans to vote at the West Haven V.A., including 92 year-old WWII veteran Martin O’Neal.

Bysiewicz and Blumenthal then formally requested the VA reverse its policy and allow for voter registration and education for veterans about new optical scan machines, paper ballots, and new voting systems in place in Connecticut for the disabled.

United States Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary James Peake has since denied these reasonable requests and is refusing to change the voting assistance policy for patients in VA care, which only permits “certified volunteers” to register patients to vote. VA certified volunteers must sign a pledge not to encourage any patients to vote and may not help any veteran register to vote or receive information about voting if the patient does not first ask for help.

In a follow up letter, Connecticut V.A. Administrator Roger Johnson wrote that voter education about the new paper ballots and optical scan machines would not be allowed, since the V.A. assumes most of its patients will be voting by absentee ballot. This directly contradicts the Help America Vote Act of 2002, which states that voters, especially those with disabilities, have the right to vote privately and independently.

On July 11th Secretary Bysiewicz and Washington State Secretary of State Sam Reed(R) launched a bi-partisan effort among Secretaries of the State to over turn the original VA directive. In a letter to VA Secretary James Peake, Bysiewicz and Reed wrote, “As a practical matter, voter registration drives have historically been a critical outreach tool for veterans in facilities to ensure that they get the opportunity to register to vote. Many veterans simply are not able to get out on their own, rendering registration much more difficult. Likewise, the longstanding practice of allowing facility employees to assist veterans in registering to vote has provided valuable assistance to veterans in need.”

The call to lift the ban was signed by 21 Secretaries of State representing voters in Connecticut, Washington, Montana, Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Oregon, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, North Carolina, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Ohio, Maine, Vermont, Rhode Island, Kansas, Missouri, Nevada and the District of Columbia.

The proposed legislation would also require the VA to make voter registration services available at VA facilities in states that request it, in accordance with the National Voter Registration Act of 1993. These services include providing voter registration forms, answering questions on registration issues and assisting with submitting voter registration forms. In addition the bill mandates the VA assist veterans at facilities to receive and use absentee ballots if they choose, and requires the VA make annual reports to Congress on assisting patients exercise their voting rights.

On July 21st, Bysiewicz received a letter pledging the support from leaders of several national voter advocacy groups, including Common Cause, Demos, The League of Women Voters, and The American Association of People with Disabilities.

The non-partisan voter advocacy groups stated in the letter that, “The American people would surely expect that the federal agency established to serve the needs of our veterans would make every effort to help them exercise the most fundamental right of citizenship,” and was mailed to VA Secretary James Peake and election officials throughout the country.

Secretary Bysiewicz and Attorney General Blumenthal have given the VA until August 1st to allow voter education and registration at its hospitals, nursing homes and homeless shelters and have pledged to use all available means, including legal action if necessary, to secure our military veterans’ rights to vote.